

WASHINGTON POST
2 February 1986

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Suicide Bombers?

The specter of fanatical Moslem terrorists seeking one-way tickets to paradise through kamikaze attacks on Western infidels has been burned into the American consciousness by no less an authority than President Reagan. More than two years ago he announced that Iran had trained at least a thousand of these potential martyrs. And terrorist groups themselves have done their best to encourage this image.

But without minimizing the ghastly damage that even a single dedicated fanatic can wreak, we suggest that there may not be as many suicidal crazies out there as the determinedly nonsuicidal terrorist leaders would like the world to think. Examination of highly classified intelligence files on Shiite Moslem terrorist activities provides a less apocalyptic picture.

Consider the opening attack in the Shiite terrorists' overt but undeclared war on the Western presence in the Middle East: April 18, 1983, when an explosives-laden van crashed into the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 17 Americans. According to investigators' reconstruction of the incident, the driver of the van was probably blown to bits—but not voluntarily. Evidence indicates he had been told he'd have time to jump out of the van before its deadly cargo was detonated by remote control.

Six months later, two devastating truck-bomb explosions at the Beirut airport killed 241 U.S. Marines and 58 French paratroopers. Intelligence reports reveal that both drivers had met the night before with a Lebanese Shiite leader, who blessed them and assured them that if they were killed in the attacks they would go to heaven.

But French intelligence reports, later shared with the CIA, added some fascinating information. Though the two drivers were Shiites, their religious passion was fueled by cold cash: each was promised \$100,000 for the dangerous mission. And each was told he'd have several minutes to flee from his truck after impact before it exploded. Did they opt for paradise over worldly wealth? Or were they double-crossed?

The next Shiite strike was a series of simultaneous bombings in Kuwait against U.S., French and Kuwaiti targets in December 1983. Seven of the eight vehicle explosions were detonated either by remote control or a timing device. The only terrorist who died needn't have. He accidentally or deliberately failed to use the safety fuse that would have allowed him to escape.

In September 1984, a van with a bomb hurtled into the U.S. Embassy annex in Beirut, killing two Americans and the driver. It is not known whether the driver went to his death willingly, because bullets stopped him before his van reached its goal: the garage under the annex.

Other acts of Shiite terrorism against Americans since—two plane hijackings and a series of kidnappings—showed no evidence of a suicidal impulse by the perpetrators.

There is also serious doubt that the number of potential martyrs is as high as the Shiite leaders claim. A top-secret report on a high-level meeting in Tehran on May 26, 1984, suggests that the terrorist leaders have difficulty finding suitable recruits. The gist of the minutes was that Iranian government officials had been ordered to produce 1,500 to 2,000 young men, preferably bachelors and veterans of the war with Iraq, to form a suicide brigade.

"I must say that we have at present a number of dedicated groups who are ready for action and who have, to the outside world, become known as suicide groups," one official declared. But he added that "these groups that we have are inadequate by themselves."

One problem, the official acknowledged, was that the existing recruits had faith but no expertise in the basics of terrorism. In fact, according to secret U.S. intelligence reports, even the suicidal sincerity of the terrorists is doubted by their leaders. A dozen or more recruits reportedly have been killed in Iranian training camps in random tests to see if they actually would go through with a suicide mission.

Footnote: Intelligence analysts stress the difference between the hordes of teen-age "soldiers" who have supposedly volunteered for suicidal mine-clearing operations against Iraq and the individual terrorist who will be acting on his own. Even if they have second thoughts about martyrdom, the boys on the Iraqi front have a tough time backing out. This is not the case with a terrorist, whose motivation may also be less overpowering.

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